Nameless Memory

By BS Murthy

'What a lovely girl she is!' thought Raja Rao, for the umpteenth time. 'May not be the ravishing type, but surely she's the charming kind. Above all, she's a wifely stuff. Won't I be able to mould her into a matchless mate? What if I propose to her? It looks like we are of the same caste and that should make matters easy. But then, what of our sub-sects? Don't they seem progressive to mind all that. But who knows? Appearances can be deceptive, can't they? Well, even then, one has still to reckon with the *gothrams* that are to be different for a match to materialize. What an irony, the custom that prescribes alliances between blood relations proscribes *sagothra* marriages! What's a *gothram*, after all? If anything, isn't it a vague concept at its very best, based as it were on the precept of lineage of one and all; that too attributed to the obscure origins of just a score of *rishis*. What a fanciful notion it is! Don't all peoples have their own idiosyncrasies? And yet, all are prone to ridicule others for their peculiar beliefs. After all, what is a custom but the prejudice of a polity or a corollary of a religious ethos?'

'Whatever, she's sweet and smart,' he continued turning his thoughts towards her, 'An ideal girl to take for a wife. Having taken to me in her own sweet way, would she be averse to the idea of marrying me? Why not seek auntie's good offices as the matchmaker? Even if she succeeds in brainwashing them all, that still leaves a question mark in matching our horoscopes. Some half-wit of an astrologer could make it naught with his crude calculations. How this new-found obsession is ruining many a match in the offing? Well, it's only love that has the power to maneuver through these encumbrances.'

The thought of the power of love brought back the memories of the year-old romance in a train journey. 'Oh! What a lovely lass she was!' he thought, and reflected upon that incredible encounter.

During that early winter, he went to Khajuraho to study the erotic architecture of its

Express at Satna to reach Madras to present his seminar paper. After exchanging pleasantries with a Father on the side and the trade unionist opposite in that four-berth coupe, he went about polishing his seminar paper well into the night.

Next morning, he was lazing by the window enjoying the refreshing landscape of the wilderness. At around eight, two girls came to greet the Father who was engrossed with the Bible. The one, who was almost in, was rather plain but the other behind her seemed tantalizing in her grey sari. With a black shawl draped around, she was a shade darker and an inch taller than her companion. Directing his gaze upon the charmer, he found her graceful though tentative in her flowing frame. As she surveyed the scene, she found him intently staring at her in wonderment. It appeared to him from her demeanor that the craving she espied in his gaze synchronized with the longing his persona insensibly induced in her mind.

While her companion was conversing with the Father, the young thing was espying him compellingly at every turn. He saw her enamoured eyes enlarge as though to accommodate his admiring stare fixed on her. On occasion, when she intruded into the ongoing conversation, his ears danced to the tune of her soothing tone in Malayalam that was alien to him.

When the train halted at some station requiring the unionist to alight, the girls grabbed the space thus created with great relish. But having lost her senses in the ecstasy of their mutual attraction, she kept mum while her friend blabbered. After a while, as her friend got up to leave, the charmer too stood up as if in a reflex action. However, having come back to her senses, she let her friend go out of the setting while she stayed back as if to prolong the event to savour more of it.

Having taken her seat opposite, she readily got up and sat in the space between him and the Father to continue her tête-à-tête with the latter. The proximity of her person and the proclivity of her posture triggered an emotional upsurge in his soul that occasioned a craving to caress her frame. Goaded by his desire to feel his love on her body, he gained her midriff left uncovered by her sari. The response of her flesh to the sense of his touch seemed to have induced warmth in her frame that provided solace to her soul. Imperceptibly she readjusted her posture as though to help him explore her state to the core. Enthused by her accommodation that enabled him access her recess, he surged on eagerly bustling about her buttocks as if they were the mounds of her essence. However, at length, as though to address her heart, when he reached for her bosom from underneath the shawl, even as he felt her pulsations, she gave a turn and dropped the book in hand. And that invited the attention of the Father.

To forestall an inquisition, he then initiated a discussion on Gibbon's thesis on the growth of the Christianity. What with the Father finding that enthusing, she was spared of an explanation! Having diverted the Father's mind to his favorite subject, he tried to take stock of the state of her mind. He found her blue in the face as she sweated in her palms. Seeing her thus, he cursed himself for being the cause of her fright. So as to alleviate her plight, he reached for his notebook and scribbled his sorriness, and gestured for her forgiveness, and seemingly feeling his impulse, even in her nonplussed state, she glanced at his message only to ignore him thereafter.

Soon she left, still dazed, and he remained remorseful and too perplexed to follow her to apologize for his rashness but when he recovered from the shock of her hurt, he ventured through the vestibules to locate her on the moving train. As he sighted her, at long last, still in a state of shock, his heart sank into the depths of agony. He got vexed even more as he found her pixilated in spite of all those apologetic gestures he came up with to soothe her soul. Her indifference made him feel worse for her sake. Feeling wretched himself, he thought only his love could address her hurt and their souls would be solaced but in their

embrace. But how were he to convince her about that? Where was the privacy to pressure her into a love saving embrace?

Not to embarrass her further with his forthrightness, he sauntered in the aisle to attract her attention. As she failed to yield, he riveted near her to make her relent. At length, as though responding to his body language, she looked at him with a vacant look that suggested all was over between them. So as not to compound her misery with his embarrassing presence, he left her with a heavy heart.

Back in the coupe, he sat distraught in her thought. As he cursed himself for his misdemeanor, his craving for her pardon got accentuated. While his remorse helped nourish his love for her, nevertheless, he suffered on that score. Just the same, he didn't dare venture to see her again, fearing he might make her suffer even more. And it's thus; he never knew where her journey had ended and when her ordeal was over. But that incident, however, haunted him for weeks on end.

'Wasn't it a case of love at first sight that induced a sense of mutual belonging in us,' he reminisced presently. 'No denying it, though. I should've befriended her before proposing, and she couldn't have refused for sure. Maybe by now, we could have been expecting our first-born. Who knows?'

'But, why did it all go haywire?' he thought in regret all again. 'I lost my head and went wayward on her body, didn't I? What led me to mislay my hand on her? Was it owing to the craving of my flesh or the urge of my love? Possibly it was the passion of my soul to possess her that triggered it all. Until it all ended in a huff, didn't we enjoy a smooth ride on the silken path of love? Wasn't my urgency to close in on her breasts that alienated her heart, once and for all? Maybe, I was compelled to feel the rhythm of her heart beats rhymed by the emotions of her love for me. What a fall it was, after a dream start! Oh, what an ignominious end it was after that ecstatic beginning.'

'When she was as receptive to my caress at her seat,' he always thought in puzzlement, 'why was it that she found my hand on her breast so offensive? But how could she have expected me to envisage the borders of her sensitivity in my state of excitation? True, she would have felt that I transgressed; yet she couldn't have failed to feel the pulse of my love in the nuances of my touch. Didn't my heart descend on my hand to vent its love on her frame! And how it rushed to my mouth seeing her disjointed! Why did she choose to punish me with banishment for the failings of my love inspired by her own persona? How she thought I deserved the deserts! Why didn't she pardon me, finding me repentant?'

He racked his brains for an answer that he never got but was sunken whenever he recalled that episode, 'Had she pardoned me, how rejoicing it would have been for both of us! Seeing me ecstatic, she should've been deliriously joyous, and what a triumph of love that could have been! But that wasn't to be. What should've been a fairy tale romance ended as an unmitigated disaster for both of us.'

'What could be her name? What a pity that the most ardent love I'd ever experienced should remain a nameless memory!' he often thought in despair.

Excerpted from the author's Benign Flame: Saga of Love